

Questions & Answers
About
Household Food Security in the United States, 2003
Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Report #42
Economic Research Service
U.S. Department of Agriculture
October 2004

Q1. What are the main findings of the report?

- Rates of food insecurity and hunger in the U.S. were essentially unchanged from 2002 to 2003.
- 88.8 percent of U.S. households were food secure throughout the entire calendar year 2003.
- 11.2 percent of U.S. households were food insecure at some time during the year.
- In 3.5 percent of households, people were hungry at times during the year because they could not afford enough food; on a typical day in November and early December, this occurred in 0.4 to 0.6 percent of households.
- In 0.5 percent of households with children, one or more child was hungry at times during the year because the household could not afford enough food.
- Food-secure households typically spent 34 percent more for food than food-insecure households of the same size and household composition.
- 56 percent of food-insecure households received help from one or more of the three largest Federal food assistance programs.
- 3.1 percent of all households—including 20 percent of food-insecure households—received emergency food from a food pantry, church, or food bank.

Q2. What does food security mean at the household level?

Food security means that all household members had access at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life.

Q3. And food insecurity?

Food insecurity means that a household had limited or uncertain availability of food, or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways (i.e., without resorting to emergency food supplies, scavenging, stealing, or other unusual coping strategies). Many food-insecure households were worried or unsure whether they would be able to get enough to eat, and most reduced the quality, variety, or desirability of their diets. They may have resorted to emergency food sources or other extraordinary coping behaviors to meet their basic food needs.

Q4. We all get hungry now and then. What does hunger mean in this report?

The physiological phenomenon is the same, but hunger as described in this report is involuntary hunger that results from not being able to afford enough food. People are not counted as “hungry” for these statistics if they were hungry because they were dieting to lose weight, or were fasting for religious reasons, or were just too busy to eat.

Q5. How are food insecurity and hunger measured?

Food security status is assessed in a nationally representative survey by a series of 18 questions about behaviors and experiences across a wide range of severity of food insecurity. For example, the “least severe” question asks whether respondents worried that their food would run out before they got money to buy more. A question at a somewhat “more severe” level asks whether they were unable to afford to eat balanced meals. At midrange are questions on reducing food intake, such as whether adults in the

household cut the size of meals or skipped meals because there wasn't enough money for food. Questions tapping the more severe levels of food insecurity ask whether children skipped meals because there wasn't enough money for food, and whether adults did not eat for a whole day because there wasn't enough money for food.

Q6. How are food-insecure households identified from these questions?

Households that answer yes to 3 or more of the 18 food security questions are classified as food insecure. At a minimum, food-insecure households have affirmed all of the following three items or else items indicating more severe conditions:

- They worried whether their food would run out before they got money to buy more.
- The food they bought didn't last, and they didn't have money to get more.
- They couldn't afford to eat balanced meals.

Q7. And how are households with hunger identified?

In addition to affirming the three items listed above, households classified as food insecure with hunger will have affirmed both of the following items or else items indicating more severe conditions:

- Adults ate less than they felt they should.
- Adults cut the size of meals or skipped meals in three or more months.

If there are children in the household, questions asking about their experiences and behaviors are also assessed, and an additional two affirmative responses are required for classification as food insecure with hunger.

Q8. Were children ever hungry because of a lack of money and other household resources for food?

In U.S. households, children—especially younger children—are usually protected from hunger unless hunger among adults reaches quite severe levels. Even so, about 207,000 households (0.5 percent of households with children) registered hunger among children at some time during the year.

Q9. How many people were hungry in the Nation because of food insecurity?

The food security survey answers this question only to within a range: between 3.9 million and 6.6 million adults, and between 207,000 and 420,000 children, were hungry at some time during the year because of food insecurity. The ranges are relatively large because the survey does not ask about each individual in the household separately. Rather, households are classified based on whether *any adult* or *any child* in the household was hungry because of lack of resources.

Q10. Were that many people hungry every day?

No. Most households that experience food insecurity in the United States experience it occasionally or episodically, not chronically. The food security measure on which the annual statistics are based classifies a household as food insecure (or food insecure with hunger) if they experienced the condition at any time during the year. The prevalence of these conditions on a given day is much lower than the annual rate. For example, ERS estimates that the prevalence of hunger on a typical day in November and early December 2003 was around 12 to 18 percent of the annual rate.

Q11. What kinds of households are most vulnerable to food insecurity and hunger?

Single mothers with children registered the highest levels of food-access problems; 32 percent of these households were food insecure, 8.7 percent were food insecure with hunger, and in 1.4 percent, children as well as adults were hungry at times. Black and Hispanic households also had rates of food insecurity and hunger above the national average. Income, of course, was a major factor in food insecurity and hunger. More than one-third of households with income below the Federal poverty line (\$18,660 for a family of 4 in 2003) were food insecure, and 12.6 percent were food insecure with hunger.

Q12. Were there any geographical patterns in the prevalence of food insecurity and hunger?

The West and South Census Regions registered somewhat higher prevalences than did the Northeast and Midwest. Food insecurity and hunger were more prevalent in central cities and in nonmetropolitan areas than in suburban areas. Prevalence rates of food insecurity varied among States from 6.2 percent in Massachusetts to 15.5 percent in Arkansas. Prevalence rates of food insecurity with hunger varied from 1.8 percent in Delaware to 5.2 percent in Oklahoma. Margins of error for most State-level estimates are sizeable, even though they are based on data from 3 years, so small differences in estimated prevalence rates between States may be due to sampling variation and the statistics are not sufficiently reliable to support precise State rankings.

Q13. What are the national trends in food insecurity and hunger?

At the national level, changes in prevalence rates of food insecurity and food insecurity with hunger from 2002 to 2003 were small and were not statistically significant.

Q14. Did food-secure households spend more for food than food-insecure households?

Yes. In 2003, the typical food-secure household spent 34 percent more for food than the typical food-insecure household with the same age-gender composition. The amount that the typical food-insecure household reported spending for food was 4 percent less than the cost of USDA's Thrifty Food Plan—a low-cost food “market basket” that meets dietary standards, taking into account household size and the age and gender of household members.

Q15. How many food-insecure households got help from Federal food programs?

Just over half of all food-insecure households participated in one or more of the three largest Federal food assistance programs during the month before the survey: 31 percent received food stamps, 37 percent received free or reduced-price school lunches for children, and 13 percent received assistance from the WIC program (the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children). Some food-insecure households were not eligible for some of these programs.

Q16. How many households got help from community food assistance programs such as food pantries and soup kitchens?

About 3.5 million households (3.1 percent of all households) received emergency food from a food pantry, church, or food bank some time during the year. Household members in 347,000 households (0.3 percent) ate one or more meals at an emergency kitchen or soup kitchen during the year. This last statistic understates the role played by emergency kitchens, however, because it does not include people who were homeless at the time of the survey.

Q17. Where do we get information about food insecurity and hunger in U.S. households?

The statistics in this report are based on data from the Current Population Survey (CPS)—the same survey that provides data for the Nation's monthly unemployment statistics and annual poverty rates. The Census Bureau conducts the CPS monthly for the Bureau of Labor Statistics, interviewing about 50,000 households each month. Once each year, after completing the labor-force interview, households are asked a series of questions about food expenditures, use of Federal and community food programs, and behaviors and experiences known to characterize households having difficulty meeting their food needs.

Q18. Where can I get more information on food security in U.S. households?

The ERS briefing room [Food Security in the United States](http://www.ers.usda.gov/briefing/foodsecurity/) has further information as well as links to reports, research publications, and other relevant websites. The web address for the briefing room is www.ers.usda.gov/briefing/foodsecurity/.